

# Strategic Insight

## Surprise and Intelligence Failure

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Surprise is as old as warfare itself. The frequency of its occurrence in history, however, offers neither adequate warning nor consolation, especially when its effects can be so devastating. The events of September 11, 2001 proved especially shocking both because they were so destructive and because they were so unexpected. Yet, both the fact that the attack occurred and even the form it took should not have taken the United States completely unawares. Familiarity with terrorist methods, repeated attacks against

U.S. facilities overseas, combined with indications that the continental United States was at the top of the terrorist target list might have alerted us that we were in peril of a significant attack. And yet, for reasons those who study intelligence failure will find familiar, 9/11 fits very much into the norm of surprise caused by a breakdown of intelligence warning.



9/11 was especially traumatic because the "surprise" of the attack was linked to an extraordinarily destructive act of terrorism. Terrorists invariably seek out targets whose destruction will result in maximum psychological impact for at least two reasons. First, they believe that attacks on symbolic targets will have an influence far beyond their actual physical impact. Nineteenth century anarchists assassinated Russian czars and other high government officials in the belief that this would collapse the social structure and produce revolution. In 1954, Algerian revolutionaries believed erroneously that a few bombs placed in police stations and public buildings would ignite a Muslim insurrection against French colonialism. Timothy McVey calculated in April 1995 that the destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City would catalyze among the American people the same indignation that he felt over the intrusion of the government into the private lives of its citizens.

It is difficult to know exactly what those Al Qaeda militants who flew airplanes into the Trade Towers and the Pentagon had in mind. At a minimum, the hijackers were carrying out the edicts of Osama bin Laden and his call to kill Americans "...wherever they existed." But the magnitude of the target and the destruction sought by the attackers suggest broader objectives. They were clearly attempting to influence U.S. public opinion and hence cause a reevaluation of American policy on a whole range of Middle Eastern issues. Many believe that they also hoped to undermine Arab governments in Egypt and Saudi Arabia that collaborated in a so-called unholy alliance with the United States. By attacking the skyscraper symbols of American capitalism, they also sought to punish Americans for the pursuit of what they saw as the Godless ways of Western culture. Al Qaeda might have even wanted to capitalize on the way high profile terrorist attacks usually provoke indignation followed by repression. They might have hoped that U.S. military action would create further Islamic militancy. Al Qaeda did manage to mobilize the American

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people and military against them and their Taliban supporters, but the Islamic world has not rallied to their call to battle. In fact, the attacks on 9/11 accelerated the decline of extremism in the Islamic world.

Second, terrorists go after high profile targets because of their groups' relative weakness. Although terrorists *assume* that large numbers of people share their righteous anger and aspirations, in fact, they usually command few resources and even fewer followers. And in the wake of extraordinarily deadly terrorist attacks, they often lose the tacit support of fence sitters as people recoil from the loss of innocent life and what appears to be a senseless political agenda. U.S. intervention in Afghanistan demonstrated that the Al Qaeda militants collected there and their Taliban supporters had shallow roots in an Afghan population unwilling to defend them. Because they have little broad support, terrorists are forced out of weakness to fall back on headline grabbing actions coordinated by a handful of militant conspirators.

Should the 9/11 attacks have taken us by surprise? In retrospect, indications that the United States in general and New York's Trade Towers in particular had been singled out for attack by the terrorists were abundant. Run-ins between U.S. Rangers and groups loosely affiliated with Al Qaeda occurred in Somalia in 1993. The Trade Towers were bombed by Moslem militants in 1993, as were the Khobar Towers in Dahrhan, Saudi Arabia in July 1996. One unfortunate irony of the attacks in Dahrhan is that the continental United States and U.S. government facilities in third countries were perceived as "softer" targets by the terrorists after force

protection measures were adopted by U.S. forces in the Middle East following the Khobar Towers bombing. Attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 were followed by that on the USS Cole in October 2000—evidence, if more were needed, of the seriousness of Osama bin Laden's declaration of war on America. In fact, the day before the 9/11 attack, the Congressional Research Service had published a report citing the links between bin Laden and Near Eastern terrorist groups. The fact that some of these attacks had been carried out by suicide bombers, repeating a pattern witnessed in the Israel-Palestine conflict, offered further proof that these terrorists were willing to resort to desperate measures.



*Al Qaeda Calling Card  
USS Cole October 2000*

### **Factors in Intelligence Failure**

The 9/11 attack on the Trade Towers has often been compared to that of the Japanese against Pearl Harbor as another infamous case of intelligence failure. On both occasions, there was ample evidence that the enemy might be pushed to undertake a desperate act. But the signs leading up to 9/11 were ignored for at least three of the same reasons that the Japanese were able to catch the U.S. Pacific fleet at anchor on the morning of 7 December, 1941—good intelligence indicators lost in the "noise" of disinformation; a belief that the enemy lacked the technical capacity to undertake the action; finally, mirror imaging, the assumption on the part of the intelligence "consumer" that the action undertaken was unlikely because it was "illogical."

While in retrospect the footprint of a surprise attack becomes easy to trace, before the event it usually requires a great effort of foresight and intuition to cull out "good" information from a plethora of data. Relevant information may be filtered out as it is sent up the bureaucratic chain because it seems unimportant, trivial or irrelevant to more important concerns—such as local FBI agents reporting that Arab students in flight schools only wished to learn how to take off, not to land. "Noise" becomes a problem especially when intelligence services have overlapping mandates, are competitive and therefore fail to cooperate to share and analyze information, or believe that the other service has a special responsibility for the collection of a particular type of intelligence. It is now obvious that the inability of the CIA and the FBI to communicate at least contributed to the failure to detect the 9/11 attacks, as the failure of army and naval intelligence to cooperate aided the Pearl Harbor debacle.



*Pearl Harbor: Opening Moments*

*Smoke rising from burning aircraft at Hickam Airfield can be seen in the distance; the Japanese quickly suppressed U.S. fighter opposition by attacking Oahu's airfields first. The shock wave from the detonation of an aerial torpedo can be seen spreading across Pearl Harbor and oil is already leaking from the USS Oklahoma.*

A second factor in intelligence surprise occurs when the technological capabilities of the enemy are underestimated. The United States discounted the ability of the Japanese Navy to project a fleet across the Pacific to launch an air attack with aerial torpedoes against U.S. ships. In fact, Pearl Harbor was inspired by the successful attack by Swordfish bi-planes launched from British carriers against the Italian fleet at Taranto. Despite this successful precedent, the United States Navy persisted in its belief that the Japanese Navy was incapable of orchestrating such an operationally and technologically sophisticated maneuver. Ironically, although the 9/11 conspirators demonstrated an organizational capacity to coordinate the simultaneously hijacking of four airliners, no one suspected that the hijackers' weapon of choice would be the box-cutter.

The final cause of intelligence surprise is "mirror-imaging"—the belief that the perpetrators will not carry out a particular act because the defender, in their place, would not do it. It seemed inconceivable to the U.S. planners in 1941 that the Japanese would be so foolish to attack a power whose resources so exceeded those of Japan, thus virtually guaranteeing defeat. Likewise, the notion of "suicide bombing" is so alien to the American—indeed the Western—outlook, that we find it difficult to fathom the mindset of enemies prepared to conceive of an operation of such horrific proportions, one in which they are



*July 4, 1997... About half of the U.S. carrier fleet is in this picture. Even the best intelligence cannot overcome vulnerabilities created by a peacetime mindset.*

prepared to immolate themselves in acts of fiery desperation. In fact, one of our interpretations of the events of 9/11 is that many of the hijackers did not realize that, by signing on to Osama bin Laden's desperate mission, they would be committing suicide. The fact that bin Laden and his henchmen were willing to use their own people in this way gives us insights into their megalomania and what life would be like in "bin Laden's world."

Most Americans accept the notion that terrorist attacks against U.S. interests are bound to occur in the future, leading to a sense of insecurity and general anxiety. But widespread recognition that terrorism is possible helps reduce its likelihood by making intelligence analysts, law enforcement officers, government officials and average Americans more aware of their surroundings and more willing to follow up reports of suspicious behavior. Surprise often has this effect, especially when the costs of a lack of vigilance are so fresh in our minds.

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